GOD'S OTHER CHOSEN PEOPLE

October 7, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Mark 1:40-2:6, 13-17
Genesis 16:1-16

"The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness" -Genesis 16:7(RSV)

There is, near the beginning of the Biblical narrative, this curious little story. It's an interesting story, but it's very much a minor matter involving minor characters. It's a little human story inside the big, main story.

You could say that about each of us. We are small episodes in some larger story. I knew a four-year old who on the occasion of a special family celebration, the fortieth wedding anniversary of his grandparents, somehow managed to get his face in every photograph taken. You know - the one of the bride and groom and wedding party, all in their sixties, posed in the living room and there he is, in the corner grinning. The cake, the champagne, the toast, the gifts: and there he is - a small story in the corner of a larger story, refusing to be overlooked, affirming his presence, reminding us that big stories are just lots of little stories together, or that you don't know the big story until you hear the little stories.

That was, of course, the brilliance and uniqueness and the power of the PBS Civil War documentary that mesmerized us two weeks ago. We know the big story but heard it, this time, as a composite of little stories, the suffering, bravery, love, passion and dying of individual human beings.

This story is about a woman called Hagar, a name unfortunately known because of a comic strip. The board of a shelter for homeless women which we support was discussing a name for a new transitional living facility. The committee had come up with Hagar's Place. The logic was unassailable. Hagar was, after all, our first homeless woman. But the proposal was defeated because the only Hagar most people know is "Hagar the Horrible."

That's too bad because it's a great story, full of irony, human passion, love, envy and finally a mysterious and amazing grace. It is also a story that powerfully reveals a truth about God which religion never seems to get.

Abraham and Sarah are God's chosen couple. They have the Covenant and God's promise that they will be parents of a great nation, but they don't have children. If they're going to be father and mother of God's

people, something better happen quickly. So they agree on a plan, a form of surrogate motherhood - neither unusual nor illegal at the time. Sarah gives her Egyptian servant, Hagar, to Abraham for the purpose of bearing a child. Hagar succeeds. And worse yet, now visibly pregnant, Hagar forgets the rules. She doesn't fade. She looks at Sarah with contempt, either because she has been violated, or because she has succeeded where Sarah had failed. In any event, the more Sarah looks at her, the worse she feels. Sarah complains to Abraham, who is indecisive... unhappily caught between two strong women, and he consents to whatever Sarah decides to do with Hagar. At this point Hagar flees to the wilderness and there an angel of the Lord finds her and persuades her to come home. She agrees: returns home. Ishmael is born. Scene one.

Scene two happens later in Chapter 21. Now Sarah conceives, is ecstatic, has a baby - Isaac. Everybody is happy. Until one day Sarah sees her infant son Isaac playing with Hagar's son Ishmael and begins to think about the fact that while she and Abraham have a wonderful son, Hagar and Abraham have a wonderful son too, a son actually older than Isaac. Suddenly Hagar who tried to run away once, is again a threat, again an unwanted outsider. Sarah wants her and her baby out of there, out of her life once and for all, out of Abraham's life, out of the story. She's not necessary. She's irrelevant. The big story of God's real chosen people can go on nicely without her.

It is, I think a scene of enormous power.

> **"So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went, and sat down over against him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, 'Let me not look upon the death of the child.' And as she sat over against him, the child lifted up his voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation.' Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink. And God was with the lad, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow."**
> [Genesis 21:14-20]

Hagar and Ishmael are no longer important. The birth of Isaac means the big story can proceed... the chosen people, the law, the temple, the Kingdom... It is now just a matter of the main plot playing out in history. Except someone raises an objection. Someone sticks a face in the corner of the family photograph. The someone incredibly is the author of the story, the one who thought up the plot in the first place, the one who originated the chosen people idea. It's almost as if the Bible is arguing with itself. The tradition wants to get rid of Hagar and her son. Right in the middle of this scheme to do just that, right at the terrible moment when the baby is going to die of thirst and exposure, and his mother is so utterly overcome by her own powerlessness, the senselessness and injustice, so overcome that she does the unthinkable, actually walks away because she cannot bear to watch her baby die, it is just then that God hears that pathetic, weak infant cry. God knows that woman's agony and rage: God hears it and knows it and feels it and responds to it and comes and saves and empowers and promises life. That's some story!

From the beginning God has a special love for the other people, the little people, the different people, the ones who get pushed aside so the big story can proceed. From the beginning God's passion for those who are excluded argues with, judges and confronts the tradition of the chosen people. It is God, not some outside troublemaker, some liberal do-gooder, who has to remind even the people of the Bible that the big story cannot exclude the little stories if it is going to be God's story.

And so at its heart, this Christian religion of ours has always been radically inclusive and has had always to argue with itself. Think of that breathtaking sequence of encounters with which St. Mark introduces the story of Jesus:

-He touches a leper. It was a radical thing to do. Touching a leper was a flagrant violation of health and religious moral standards the practical effect of which was to absolutely shut out a whole class of desperately sick people.

-He heals a paralytic and forgives the man's sins because the religious tradition said he must be guilty of something and so he was not only paralyzed physically but condemned to live a life of paralyzing self-loathing.

-He walked by Levi, the tax collector, that despicable traitor who had sold his soul for a few dollars and who no one would be seen dead with; and he invited Levi to the intimate circle of his closest friends. "Levi," Mark says, "rose and followed him." You bet he did.

-"Then he sat down in his own house and broke bread with many tax collectors and sinners."

Vanderbilt theologian, Sally McFague, writes, "Jesus' table fellowship with the outcasts of society, his eating with them as a friend... (is) an enacted parable of God's friendship with humanity... That simple event is a ritual so basic to Christianity that a case could be made that it is a, if not the critical motif in Jesus' ministry." [Models of God, p. 168, 172]

That's what the church is for, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Holy Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago - a place where God's argument with religious and racial and economic and social exclusiveness is remembered and revered; a community where God's blessed friendship with the castoffs is mirrored in the inclusiveness of the body; a place where God's passionate love for the whole creation is reflected in the celebration of all the little stories of all God's other people.

There are plenty of them. Let Hagar stand for them all:

-for minorities, exploited, sometimes enslaved, always used and despised by majorities...

-let her stand for the dangerous gap between the Western world and the Muslim world, a gap which in the heat and conflict around the Persian Gulf, treads close to racism...

-let her stand for pregnant teen-agers, fresh out of viable options...

-for the permanent underclass...

-for persons with AIDS, shut out like the leper Jesus touched, often times by people who dare to use his name...

-let her baby stand for the children - the thousands of babies who will die of thirst and malnutrition and exposure... the babies of this nation and city who will die, needlessly, in the midst of plenty...

-let her stand for homeless men and women who live on the streets of Chicago and who sleep in the corners and under the bushes of this building...

-for women like the client of Deborah's Place who broke her leg last winter and refused to allow the cast to be removed for weeks and months, who ultimately had to be physically restrained so the cast could be removed because, the caseworker explained, because the cast was hers and she wasn't about to let anything go that was hers.

God loves them. God loves them when nobody else does. God loves them when we can't.

The need to be inside, to belong, to be accepted, to be welcome at the table, is real and powerful and universal. The psychologists tell us that our earliest need is for acceptance and our earliest fear is rejection. That truth about us never changes much. God has created us for community, for fellowship, for friendship with one another, and with God. Our basic need is to be included. Our worst fear is to be excluded. That need and that fear can drive us.

An article in a recent edition of Fortune asked, "How Much Does Class Matter?" and explored the unusual phenomenon that a sense of class is diminishing in our culture while there is an unprecedented search for social acceptance. A Philadelphia sociologist said, "This is a generation desperately yearning for class." Unprecedented numbers of Americans got rich in the 1980s. The number of registered polo players doubled in the decade and caused the cost of polo ponies to skyrocket. You can, the article announced, hire a consultant to help you approach that ultimate barometer of acceptability, The Social Register. The consultant will teach you manners, how to dress, style your hair, what briefcase to carry and scotch to drink, and see to it that you are invited to the requisite and socially necessary cocktail parties and benefits. "It helps," one of them said, "if you can look like you just stepped off the Concorde."

It is devastating to be not welcome, not accepted, not included. And at a level so deep within us that we don't have easy access to it, we buy insurance and build defenses and invest our treasure and our highest hope to make certain that we are acceptable and accepted and included by someone. Let Hagar stand for that in every one of us.

Let her stand for my need to know that in whatever wilderness I find myself -

-a self-imposed wilderness of anger and resentment

-a voluntary wilderness of guilt

-or a wilderness to which I have been banished by the rejection of someone who is important to me, or the exclusion from the school or job or friendship or relationship I want and need

-or the wilderness of loneliness

-or the ultimate wilderness of the valley of the shadow of death

Let her stand for my deepest need to know that the wilderness of exclusion is where God's angels come to call us home, to invite us inside, to welcome us to a place that is waiting for us at the table.

Let her stand for the promise that God hears the infant's cry, that God comes to wipe away our tears, to stand with us when we look into the valley of the shadow, to lift us up when we fall.

Lesslie Newbigin, beloved missionary and Bishop for the Church of South India, wrote recently:

> "When we see Jesus eagerly welcoming the signs of faith among people outside the house of Israel: when we see him lovingly welcoming those whom others cast out: when we see him on the cross with arms outstretched to embrace the whole world... we are seeing the most fundamental of all realities; namely a grace and mercy and loving kindness that reaches out to every creature." [Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World]

Even to Hagar and Ishmael this precious old story promises, and if that be so, even to God's other people, to you and me.

World Communion, a table set in the middle of the world.

From the beginning of time it is a picture of what God has in mind. There's a place for everybody.

Thanks be to God. Amen.